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"Are You There, Dog? It's Me, Riley": Poems

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**Are You There, Dog?
It's Me, Riley**

Riley O'Connell

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CONTENTS

Nor is the Water Broken
2

My Father's Son
3

A place to retire
4

Julie
5

Puppy Love
7

At a Distance
9

The Way You Remember
12

Terminal
13

How We Remain
14

Drinking overpriced coffee with you in San Jose, Calif.
15

Intimacy
16

Fish
17

Are You There, Dog? It's Me, Riley
18

On being told of my father's cancer two days before Christmas over crab
cakes at the White Chocolate Grill
20

Enamor
21

When we talk about the future, we talk about
22

Confection
23

Pumpkin Crunchers™
25

Keeping Quiet
26

What a Woman Wants
27

In the Genesis of July
28

Blues all the Way to Midnight
30

The earwigs on my bedroom door don't care for my housemates
31

Everywhere I go,
32

Tying the Knot
33

Grief (n.)
34

Love overwhelms us

Or death takes

*One more
Of those
We cherish most.*

Where else?

Where else do we go?

»Gregory Orr, *River Inside the River*

Nor is the Water Broken

...like the moon reflected on the water.

The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken.

»Dogen

As a child I was the sea,
 ebbing and absorbing the
 world, always returning
 to solid land. Inside
me, unexplored
 depths, creatures unidentified,
 hidden away. Flowing into
 books, people. Sinking
into pages, myself.

 A child, my brother was
 the sun, bright and warm
 and consistent. Always
rising above those who wouldn't
 look him in the eyes. Days of
 radiation left him burnt
 out but he lit up the nights
we brought joke books to
 the dinner table.

 The day he died eclipsed everything
 I knew about morning,
grief frothing beneath
 my tongue, ripping and
 curling in my fingertips,
 my chest a reef jagged
and barren, the moon
 tiding me over, and
 over,
 and
over

 until the stars break through
 and the light shines down.

My Father's Son

My Italian professor asks
me when I want
kids we are learning
the future
tense it is just a practice
question in the book
it does not have to
be true but she smiles
expecting we are women
meant for mothering why
would a sweet girl like
me not want kids she
makes me give her
a number a ballpark figure 26
is a respectable age
to start a family of course
parenting is so rewarding yes
you can have a dog
too
and I feel eyes on me
like ice on me my voice
shivers I do not know
how to say I've seen
my father cry only twice
in my life when his son
died and when I became
a poet laureate
but that's a lie I know
how to speak Italian just not
how to be okay with my future
kids not having family
on my side because
my brother died and
I became a poet laureate and I am
scared I will always be
scared around nine-year-old
boys that look like
my father's son

A place to retire

My father wants to live in a yurt. He wants to live
in a yurt because he saw one on the Discovery

Channel and my boyfriend saw one at a museum
and my father thinks this is a sign. This is a sign

because they've both lived in San Diego.
San Diego is home. The beach is home.

My father wants to retire in a yurt on the beach
in San Diego. My mother wants a fully-functioning kitchen.

A kitchen would make her happy. What makes
her happy makes my father happy. My father is happy

with commonality, but I want my own room.
My room used to be my brother's room before

he died. Before he died, I slept
on his trundle bed some nights, so some nights

I guess it was my room, too. Both rooms are my room, now.
Now, my father wants to live in a yurt,

but a yurt wouldn't have a room for my brother.

Julie

My mother is a rainstorm —
fierce,
life-giving,
never quiet.
Bright like lightning,
she loves in a downpour.
She is breathtaking.
She always smells amazing,
she can be difficult to drive with,
and now that I live in California, I need her more than ever.

She is the kind of Wednesday afternoon where you are not counting down the days till Friday.
She is the third beer, and you're tipsy,
cheeks warm with alcohol and courage.
She is all spunk and cursive handwriting and
golden retriever puppies and
That's What She Said jokes and
she is red,
red,
red,
passionate,
brilliant.
She is 5am, the pink-and-orange highlight in the clouds,
the pentagonal bits of sky visible between the leaves of a tree.
A cottonwood.

She is a mosaic of long nights and a thousand novels,
two heavy babies and an even heavier heart
from losing the lighter of the two to cancer,
from loving him with every pound, every
ounce of her being,
and living on,
somehow.
She is a wonder, the
raindrops that collect like rosary beads on car windows,
unquantifiable,
a reminder, a prayer,

that she stayed afloat when God came along and
poked holes in her life jacket, when
a heart attack took her father,
cancer her son,
suicide her cousin,
all within two weeks of February.

My mother is a storm chaser,
training for years to contain the hurricane in my gut,
the tsunami in my throat,
the earthquake in my chest.
She is the sunset after the storm,
lighting the whole sky on fire,
white and shining against all things black
and all things dark.
She is a starburst constellation,
a five-foot-six perambulating micro-universe.
My mother is not a star,
she is the undivided universe.
Completely unparalleled.

Oscar Wilde said it is woman's tragedy to become her mother.
On the contrary, I think the real tragedy is that Oscar Wilde never met my mother.
She is more home than any place I've ever lived.

Puppy Love

If I had a meet & greet with
every dog I follow on Instagram
several hundred dogs yes
I'm serious I'd hug the Golden Retrievers
first bury my face in their thick blonde fur
wet noses white lashes like feather dusters
have you seen how they twinkle
in the sun stars every last one of them
maybe I'd throw a blanket over one
and watch him confusedly crawl out then
he'd bury his head in my lap and gaze up at me
and pardon me I'm free of sin what a good
boy we'd have a ball
a tennis ball
do you think that Husky understands
when I call her beautiful can she hear me telling you
right now do you think she knows
I mean look at her so regal
she's the smartest person I've ever met
and she's got hearts for paws imagine her
running through a meadow
oh wait you don't have to
imagine we're in a meadow right now
where else would I have this
glorious celebration it's doggone
perfect you think I'm crazy but don't
you see they're incredible Labradors
look like fuzzy potatoes
when they're born corgis are loaves of bread
on legs those legs so
little did you know I have never met a dog I didn't love
except every poodle I've ever met
in my lifetime there will be no poodles
at my meet & greet that is final maybe
you'd like to come to my dog party
we could call it a *pawrty* or a *shindog*
we'll raise the *woof* you'll love it maybe

I'll even pet a cat for you or just look at one
from a reasonable distance I'll be honest
I still think they're completely infernal
but I'll allow one at my pet-together
look at me no look at the dogs look
at their tails swishing through the grass
that's right you can't see them because
they're moving so fast and they're smiling
look at the canines on those canines
look at the puppy eyes on those puppies I love
a million things but I love them the most I think
I've seen the face of god in a dog I'm being serious
if that Maltese there put its paw on my knee
I'm pretty sure it would legally own me
for the rest of my life you're looking at me
like that again like I'm crazy well I'm not
just crazy about you yeah you were right
there's too many dogs here who's gonna pick up their
shit my mom warned me about this

At a Distance

He calls you remarkable in his basement, lights
dimmed so you have to look right at him to see
that fish-hook smile r

e
e
l
i .
n n
g i
you

He likes that you are a writer. (They always do.)
(They think

it means you'll write poems about them and he is no exception,
asking you over a beer how long it's gonna take for you
to make him into a metaphor. You laugh,
ask him when he's gonna give you a reason to.

There's a certain poetry in caring
for someone who does not know
how to care for you. His pride lied in
how well he could read you,
how quickly he forgets
how he only ever listened to you on audiobook,
how all he ever does is press a few buttons
to get you talking. He calls this intimacy,
but you have never felt more
distant.

When you met, he called you brilliant,
clever,
unanticipated,
because the first time you two actually met, you were drunk
on the moment (and white wine, and so many things
that were not him).

He will call you all these things, but he will never call you

beautiful unless he is comparing you to all the other women

he has slept with. Instead, he will call you naïve or
overwrought or
“better than this,”
though he will not tell you what “this” is.
He will never tell you what *this* is.

But he will tell you that he slept with someone in the same way
he would tell you he switched to decaf coffee:

something he does so he can sleep better at night.

When he is sleeping,
you sneak onto the balcony and cry,
broken rib cage and punctured
lungs, shake your soul like a Magic-8 Ball that sounds far
too much like him:

Better not tell you now.

Reply hazy, try again later.

Don't count on it.

He asks you

what you're doing, trembling
on his balcony at 2am, lips chattering apologies to
nobody at all.

Do not tell him.

You've aired enough dirty laundry for the night, and he will just hang you

out
to
dry.
It
is
sim-
ple:

one day his will to
for cigarettes and

be with you went out
never came back.

Do not go looking for it.

Instead, make laundry lists
of things you wish you'd told him:

*You make me feel like a seashell in a city with no shoreline.
I never understood centripetal force until I tried to get close to you.
I had the same twin-sized bed for 13 years, and it was never as cramped as
sleeping next to both you and your ego.*

Do not tell him
these things.

He is not entitled to your words, girl,
to anything that comes out of your mouth.

He is not entitled to your mouth,
to your hands,
to your eyes that keep trying to see the big picture
but only ever catch sight of him, always gazing
past you and
never at you.

So when he breaks your heart, put it in rice or rosé or
Jennifer Aniston rom-coms,
but do not put it back in his hands.

Remember,
the only thing he was ever good at
holding
was you

at a distance.

The Way You Remember

You don't like the way the story ends, so you rewrite it
in your head, make it smoother, sweeter, more wisteria than hysteria,

more rose and less thorn. He tells you that is not how life works,
that you can't just up and change everything you don't like, that

being a poet does not make you a god. You nod. He is right.
It makes you a *goddess*. The way you remember,

you left on that Saturday, walked out of his apartment with bags
in your hands, not under your eyes, because the way you remember,

you lost no sleep over this boy, left him with his pants
around his ankles and his head up his ass, like you found him.

The way you remember, you forgot him, forgot his heart and hands and
halving pasta aglio e olio and Capri Suns on his balcony,

forgot which of you brought what to the table, forgot it was
obvious. You forgot his charm, how it made you overlook

the auto accident in your lungs when he told you goodbye. You forgot
his goodbye, the lingering last-moment eye contact from separate Muni cars,

like you were in a fucking Lifetime movie. You forgot telling him
you couldn't care less about him, hoping he'd take it

at face value and not how you really meant it, not that you'd tried
to care less, that all you ever seem to be capable of is caring more because

you have never figured out how to love someone halfway, and
you still miss him, and you still haven't found a way to forget

this isn't true.

Terminal

I have this recurring dream where
I'm back in the hospital,
four months shy of my eighth birthday,
death a faraway train that had not yet stopped
at our station,
the impending alarm all but I
could hear.

And I'm watching *The Cat in the Hat*,
white walls,
blue sheets,
orange bottle of hand-sanitizer
on the table beside the tissues,
the pamphlets,
bed a thousand times more firm
than my understanding of why I am here.

And I'm texting my brother.
He's sitting across from me,
but he cannot speak, so I
text him,
tell him about that "Band Geeks" episode of SpongeBob
he loved so much,
and he laughs, types back,
"omg Riley,
I'm literally dying rn."

How We Remain

for Olivia

A week before Thanksgiving I am
35,000 feet above the Rockies drinking

cabernet out of a plastic cup on a flight
delayed to Denver when the attendant

phones for a doctor and gets three
at the same time a girl from my high school

wings unattended out a 7th story window
5,500 miles away in Trastevere how unspeakable

the world is gutting us like grapefruits
in the mourning rooting us in an ever-rising

river eviscerating us against the stones
how habitual this game of tug and war

how demanding the way it forces our reconciliations
makes us to forgive our gods for wresting

our worlds from beneath once-steady
feet how we remain is remediless

a brief case weighing heavy in hands holding
heads holding breaths holding out for what

we are waiting I don't know
anything but this.

Drinking overpriced coffee with you in San Jose, Calif.

is far finer than all the *cappuccini* I had in Italy combined
with the one in Dublin, two chocolate daisies foaming over
Bailey's, is always lusher than the Eiffel Tower & I both lit
on a Saturday night, is much better than people-watching every
Xmas Insta pic taken at LACMA with you, is preferable to perfect
pork-filled pillows in Pittsburgh, the city that steals you from me
for a summer with its three rivers and cheesesteaks, and maybe
just maybe it's because of my huge crush on you, even now,
across from you at this table, even now I love you like a freight
train barreling down the tracks, like the Polar Express break-
ing the ice, like *let's measure our hands against each other.*

You make me warm like a baguette fresh out the oven,

like *fill me, sustain me, let me hold you close to my*

drunk, chattering lips in this Taco Bell drive

thru, like your laugh, so honest it leaves

you breathless and still. It is love, just

us two *americanos* in this coffee shop, hooked on a moment & caffeine.

Intimacy

to wake to the sick crick of flu in your throat
to feel the pull of his heavy hand on your waking waist

to sip the last letter of breakfast in bed
to the tune of a Russian decapitation song

to release the laughter gushing in your gut
when he writes JEB for every three-letter clue on the crossword

to know this is how you'll say it
burrowed in his arms like a besotted prairie dog

to finally whisper the words into the pool of his collarbone
to repeat it when he doesn't hear you

to feel the truth of it spread inside your chest
gripping and fixating like a starfish

Fish

Today I met a dog named Fish in Santa Cruz.
He swims between my boyfriend and me,

between our voraciously affectionate hands,
our calls of *good boy, good boy, good boy,*

and soon our hands are awash with kisses,
a flood of humanity from this dog named Fish.

His owner explains the name choice without prompt:
fish, he says, was the dog's first word as a baby.

Of course, I say. My dog wasn't speaking
until age four, he's a shy one. Fish here is

a prodigy, a boy wonder, a *barketype*, if you will.
He's making a splash in California.

Are You There, Dog? It's Me, Riley

I hope you don't mind that I'm writing this to you
instead of The Man Upstairs™.

I guess I hope He doesn't mind, either.

Sometimes I just feel like I've learned more about the world from looking
at a Golden Retriever
than a crucifix.

Is that bad?

It's not that I don't want to talk to God,

I'm just worried it's been too long.

What if He has a new number? Or,

what if He doesn't? What if He just leaves me
on read again?

Are you there, Dog? It's me.

Ever since Kyle brought you home from the shelter,

I've believed more and more

in magic. Or karma.

They're kind of the same thing anyway,

sort of,

right?

Like, if I'm good

and God's Good,

everything will be good,

sort of,

right?

I remember the first time I called God in vain.

It was a Sunday, I think

maybe he was resting. I was, too.

I don't remember

who was supposed to be watching. My brother

had cancer. Diagnosable but not curable.

That last part, I wouldn't find out till my freshman year
of college, in an email from my mom.

She didn't mean to tell me like that.

She thought I already knew.

Are you there, Dog? It's me.
It's been thirteen years and everything is still
whiskey-raw, still
fuzzy, still
I am shocked that my arms can bear
the weight of it,
that my grieving fingers keep
counting the days, inaudibly,
a sitcom on mute.
Each mass feels like an interrogation to which
I have no answers.
I never do.

What I do know is this:
When it comes to M&Ms, the smaller the better.
The opposite is true for dogs.

Here's what I don't know:
When God ceased being the blanket I crawled under on rainy days.
When He became the rain instead,
when He drowned me by not letting me in
on the emotional arc of my life's story.
When the tears of my childhood became
the type of flood I can't adulterate.

Are you there, Dog? It's me, Riley.
I've got a bone to pick with God,
and it's not the kind you're gonna like.

On being told of my father's cancer two days before Christmas over crab cakes at the White Chocolate Grill

When he was eight
years old bullies feared my brother's cancer
would spread catch them in the middle
of math class
in the middle of fractions
quotients
but that didn't add up of course
my brother's cancer would spread
but not outside the walls of his solitary
juvenile body trapped inside the cancer
had nowhere else to go and so stuck
around for two
years longer than most children get when I get
the crab cakes my father says
we have something to tell you
should've told you
months ago they found cancer
but I am okay he jokes it's like kickball
I kicked it and lost a ball
it will not return I imagine
a future without my father
who would ask me if I'm okay if
my linkedin page was up to date if
the oxford comma is really all that if
it is important if I'm gonna eat
all that pancetta on my plate if
I changed someone's life today at the table
my crab cakes are cold
buried beneath parsley and fries and
six feet under the lamp light I say
I'm okay when he asks.

Enamor

1 night, years ago, I saw you on a red mattress
in someone's garage on Bellomy, it was
2am, and I,
tipsy and freshman,
kept my distance, watched instead
as you handled that holey wooden body,
strings sighing at your touch.
I was putty in your palms,
or at least I wished I was.
This happened for
3 months, and then
4 more.
It was an art crush, and
I could only refrain for so long.
I knew nothing about you but your eyes
crinkle like an old poem
when you smile,
and I almost told you that after
5 drinks behind the bar,
but we talked about Chance instead.

Months later, you ask me what's a
6-letter word for "inflammation with love."
This is what we do on Wednesdays:
sushi,
Star Wars, and the
New York Times crossword puzzle,
your hands on my back,
your name in my mouth.
You say there's one in
7 odds I'll get telekinetic powers
from the NyQuil,
and I laugh.
And you kiss me.
And we knock teeth because
we're both smiling.

When we talk about the future, we talk about

blenders, about dumplings and puppies in the palms of our
hands and eyelashes on pillow cases and twenty ounce martini

glasses. We talk about glasses, even though your vision
is perfect to a tee like the ball you used to play long before

you cozied close enough to eye my flickering
pupils studying the five o'clock shadow that follows me

home. Talk about the green onions sprouting from your fifth finger,
the same one that floats across my puddle-rich cheekbones

when panic rocks me like a buoy bewitched by the sea.
About our six coffee machines prattling in their seats, the sound drowned

only by the purr of your fingers on mahogany over the Bay.
Our merry song. Our blended heart.

Confection

When working in the restaurant industry, you will learn a handful of things, like how to build muscles and relationships, how to make good conversation and even better guacamole. You will learn that giving good tips on the menu does not guarantee you good tips on the bill. (But you will never learn how to be okay with this.)

And most importantly, you will learn in the middle of taking the lunch order of a flustered family of five on the second Saturday of your second summer as a server back home in Colorado that panic attacks fail to understand good timing in the same way too many people fail to understand that enchiladas, taquitos, tacos, burritos, nachos, and tostadas, are essentially the same thing just under different names.

So when that panic attack starts, you do, too — start for the bathroom, for the front door, start to feel lightheaded, clammy, start to forget how to breathe, how to speak, how to process anything but the very real feeling that your life is ending on the curb of a French bakery with nobody to see you in your final moments but a 20-something Buddhist man who tells you not to think about it.

You will learn not to resent people who tell you this.

You will learn to try for their sake, to try to focus instead on puppies or how giraffes' spines work or how macarons are made.

You will learn that the exquisite intricacy of making French confections isn't really that different than that of making and remaking yourself every morning into someone you can tolerate being.

Most macaron recipes call for grocery store almond flour, but seeing as you have crippling anxiety and may prefer to not leave your house, you will learn to make it on your own by placing all your blanched, skinless, unseasoned, raw emotions — I mean, almonds — in a blender until they, and you, are fine.

Next is the confectioners' sugar, which, if you're unfamiliar, is a water-based solution, making it ideal for icings, frostings, or other pretty things whose intention is to cover up what's really going on beneath the surface.

Then come the eggs, which you will crack and extract the whites, as a reminder to yourself that good things come from those who break. Beat them until peaks form, just slightly less stiff than the mountains you have allowed to form between you and the rest of the world. In fact, speaking of isolation, separate the egg whites well in advance. Tell yourself this is a precaution. Allow them,

and yourself, to sit for hours, even overnight, so they may mature like you had to long before you wanted to.

Add more sugar for sweetness. Those macarons should not be bitter like you are.

Bake at 325° for ten minutes — or in a friend's garage until you feel light as air, as a macaron, as your brother's final, even breaths before he died. Bake until you no longer feel like you, too, have died. (The only dying you should be doing involves food coloring and frosting.)

Sandwich two cookies together with frosting, but be gentle. Do not think how you, too, feel sandwiched between opening up or not, between two shades of the same regret. Do not think of yourself as delicate, but rather as a delicacy, and eventually you will learn to love yourself again.

You will.

Pumpkin Crunchers™

*A dog can never tell you what she knows from the
smells of the world, but you know,
watching her, that you know
almost nothing
»Mary Oliver, “her grave”*

Oh, to live so simply, blackberries and
pumpkin crunchers (so spoiled),
to love just two things: everything
and everybody in the world,
to hang out and eat the wind at a speed
unconscionable to your simple hungry jaw,
to know love incarnate is a single paw to the knee
and everything you do is a wonder,
and your wonder is a miracle,
and miracles are slices of salami given so covertly
you almost forget they're for you,
go berserk with kisses,
a small gift to your human.
Thank you.
You know we could use all we can get.

Really, we're all just dogs,
dogs with politics.

Keeping Quiet

a #MeToo found poem from Pablo Neruda's "Keeping Quiet"

*Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.
»Pablo Neruda*

Perhaps I, a single-minded man, wanted everything
on earth, wanted for a moment a second to count up the still sea
of arms, hands, clothes, as fishermen would whales, wanted without wars of
green-shaded women, of their inactivity, of our moving, of later proving the language of
silence.

In total, life seems cold now, a sudden strangeness, we men, once huge, threatened
and rushed to death to teach understanding of those who were hurt. (It is all so much
to be ourselves, hurting and gathering together.)

But language, that confused exotic engine, could prove dead,
when our fires, face it, want nothing but salt and
interruption.

Stop.

Prepare a clean face. Look at us as brothers, as we look at you as victories,
dead or alive. Truck on. Let's not speak
on any sadness. Might this teach survivors:

What should have moved will never walk.

What a Woman Wants

a ring / nay amphitheater / of dogs
named after / other species / a house
big enough / to contain her / almost
constant rage and / also the dogs /
a good book / without men / a tapestry / of
smart women / in power / unlimited
la croix / to know how to pronounce /
la croix / to be called / her own name /
or at least *woman* / not *girl* / and god
not *female* / a nice dinner / to be eaten /
alone / a new president / a new precedent /
a single man / to be held / accountable /
a longer life / for our iphones / or at least
for ourselves / trader joe's mint coins /
trader joe's coins / the things we do / to go
noticed / to be noticed / not touched /
to be touched / by something
that is not a man's / expressionless hands

In the Genesis of July

twenty-eight days after I turned eighteen

past my waxy purple lips & uprooted

my overall-painted thighs left me

in the bed you made I was drunk & couldn't

with vomit in my teeth

full-bodied & breathing knows

if you tried to kiss me

a lie since

you did not

when you text me & I am sleeping still

I don't

& your messages swallow

& the panic mugs me in the morning

when I cry & my dad asks

I just can't wait for college

you cork-screwed your tongue

a wilted bouquet from between

breathing but barely

imagine why you would do it

in the kitchen my mom is

nothing asks me in the morning

& I say no not quite

to try implies to fail which

you pretend it didn't happen

while you are safe for weeks

respond

the silence like an AM wave

coffee & on commercial breaks &

what's wrong I say with a smile

he doesn't know

there & I was drunk & must have

besides the hush of a no under my breath

your throat filled with the hushed no-ing of

her to be honest when she said

when you did it to me in the genesis of July

believe a girl

about this

& this is enough to pacify him because

when he was out of town you grabbed me down

tasted bad did you taste anything

I hope it wrought a cemetery in

the girl before me I didn't believe

you did this to her

I didn't believe anyone could

like me

about anything.

Blues all the Way to Midnight

When, in the middle of the night, the fan turns itself on with its signature cerulean shine, unleashes to the ceiling the cold on a setting tagged *sleep*, I wake startled under uninhabited suspensions of twinkle lights, respectably spooked.

The unplugging is swift and jumbled, a sudden swear-filled circumstance in the dark (or the dark save the blue that stirred me moments ago), before dragging the fan by the crick to the corner, where its naked back confronts

the great expanse, and I am there, too, though less prominently, at once pondering the possibility of its consciousness, of the appliance quietus I have just enacted, mistrusting its dead gradient of speeds, blues all the way to midnight, Kyle's favorite

color, because of course I'm thinking about my dead brother now, fourteen years later, inexplicably, and dare I say it, out of the blue.

The earwigs on my bedroom door don't care for my housemates

or their loud music or boyfriends never locking
the side gate, or the dirty communal counters,

even though they have likely never seen them. (I heard
the kitchen termites are gossips.) The earwigs snap their pincers

when I call them roommates, despite knowing
it is a joke. They detest the unflattering comparison.

We are always growing, they protest, asserting their adulthood,
unlike some people, after five molts, like the non-parasites they are.

But those earwigs, dirty veggie clippers hiding in darkness
on the garage, my warm and isolated haven, those earwigs love me,

my dresser and dog-a-day calendar, my shoe rack, fridge
all clean and quiet and harboring exclusively unexpired food.

They love my private poetry performances and
Brooklyn 99 marathons and the postcards from abroad, reminders of

where they summer. (The earwigs on my walls are very well-
traveled, I have come to learn.) Yet just as with my housemates,

I like the earwigs best away from me, with better boundaries, wish they knew
how to hold a conversation or put a roll of toilet paper on

the brushed nickel holder, how to take their earwig laundry out of the
earwig washing machine, how to be, in any sense of the word, human.

Everywhere I go,

my brother throws change at my feet,
pennies on the porch and dimes in the aisles
of Trader Joe's.

Make a wish, he insists, but I don't want to
go to Disney World or on a jet to Hawaii, I
only want to swim in the sharp intake of breath before

he laughs at a SpongeBob joke and it reflects off
the walls and we are all alive
with laughter. With all these riches

lying around I wonder what job my brother has
in heaven. His resume sports opening pitch,
basketball captain, halftime snack vacuum,

with special skills in boogie-boarding
down the stairs in a laundry basket and
anthropomorphizing Beanie Babies

in gussied-up Gogurt-box cars, so I can see God
giving him the big bucks. And even easier I see Kyle —
my beloved brother, athlete and devourer of

seventy-two simultaneous blueberries, self-proclaimed
comedian and Mighty Beanz pundit, Kyle who split
his Halloween contest-winning Hershey's into even bits

for the whole class and took them all to *The Incredibles*
in theaters — throwing his petty cash at me from where I can't reach
like the last Reese's cup on the last Easter

he was alive.

Tying the Knot

At the bachelorette party, we talk in the hot tub
about the best lip balm and embalming services

in the Denver Metro Area, the latter a matter Abby knows
a thing or two about. She, the bride's friend, French braids

my hair between vodka shots and takes on true love,
while I think about Matt and the glossed wood

over his head, the knot around his neck,
wonder if someone soft as Abby lowered him

into the cushioned casing, tucked him in like a doll
or a child awaiting a Santa Claus they don't yet know

will never come. Inside, MS TO MRS balloons glint gold above
the table, bubbling over with champagne and dirty card games,

and when it's done, she ties the knot of my hair,
apologizes, says, "Hope that didn't hurt too bad."

Grief (n.)

for Matt

How my mom looks at me heavy in the heart
of my bed and I know. Two days before knowing

she looked at me heavy but that was after
wine and we laughed but this time

we are both sober and everything's grave.

How she looks at me and every wrinkle weighs
beside her listless lips and yet she doesn't look

away, even as the words overturn her
tongue, hang impossibly before us, take

root. How the world splinters and then goldens

kiss my bawled cheeks beyond retrieve
in a congested home of more mourners than I

have seen in years. How we look to each other
and hold. How the drinking doesn't stop

the heartache. How words don't work.

And on Christmas, grief is the beach dog no bigger
than a pigskin running to pick up and carry a branch

bigger than itself. And maybe the stick is a metaphor
for the body plucked and broken and held

trapped in the teeth of a backwards god

or maybe the dog is the metaphor
holding the sharp thing among the folds of its tongue

fetching it unquestioningly without release

until it is too tired to keep

or maybe the body is its own figure-ative language

a simple simile, its own semantic reservoir
and maybe when the ocean sobs across the sand it's seeking

the sanctuary found only in another's soles. Maybe grief
is how the pelicans dive beak-first into what drowns them

before climbing into the setting sun.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riley O'Connell likes her men like she likes her coffee: cool and roasted daily. She studies English and Communication at Santa Clara University and has since October 2018 taught creative writing therapy at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital through the Palliative Care Department and *Healing HeARTS* magazine, as part of her Canterbury Fellowship. She loves good mysteries, bad puns, and all dogs. She is probably making pasta as you read this.

Her poems, some of which are featured here, have won awards like the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize, the Shipsey Prize, and Denver's inaugural Youth Poet Laureateship, and have been featured by the Poetry Center of San José, the Santa Clara County Poet Laureate, the Edward M. Dowd Art and Art History Building, and the de Saisset Museum's Spring 2017 Geography of Hope exhibit presented by former Sinatra

Artist in Residence, Anna Deavere Smith. A member of three honor societies at SCU, O'Connell has also been published in Volume 104 Issue 2 of the *Santa Clara Review*, SCU's global literary magazine for which she currently serves as Editor in Chief.

At SCU, O'Connell founded and organizes the university's first quarterly poetry slam and music open mic, the Bronco Slam&Jam, and serves as Founder and President to Slam Poets of Santa Clara University, an RSO established in 2017 with the intent of creating SCU's first CUPSI team. Prior to being Editor in Chief to the *Santa Clara Review*, she served as Editor to *The Owl*, SCU's undergraduate-only literary magazine, during which time she published their first physical magazine, featuring poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and art from SCU students. She has performed at 11 of Igwebuiké's Love Jones talent shows, 10 Bronco Slam&Jams, an APSU Night Market, the Poetry Center of San José's 2017 National Poetry Month Poets Night at Sunnyvale Library, the Edward M. Dowd Art and Art History building opening, the College of Arts and Sciences' 2017 Family Weekend *Undergraduate Research and Creative Expression Forum*, and the 2018 Grand Reunion, and will emcee the English Department's *Calamum* student-faculty showcase in May 2019. In September, she will be a featured performer at the 5th annual San José Poetry Festival at MACLA.

With graduation approaching, O'Connell is seeking out careers in the Bay Area which will allow her a continued pursuit of her passions for writing, editing, and spreadsheeting everything ever in a creative, communicative, collaborative, and, ideally, dog-friendly environment.



